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ABSTRACT

A study examined the literature preferences of middle school students and centered around humorous literature. Four student groups of rural seventh and eighth graders (261 students) in language arts classes responded to a questionnaire about their preferences. Results indicated that middle school students were interested in reading humorous literature with subpopulations by grade level, sex, and/or achievement level showing no difference in level of humor appreciation. Results showed that humorous literature was consistently rated higher than other literature forms and was requested by students. Findings suggested that humor is an important part of development and should be included in an adolescent's course of study with such placement logically occurring in the area of language arts. (Thirteen tables are included; 31 references are attached. (PRA)

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Preferences of Middle School Students in Humorous Literature

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Abstract

The study of humor and the adolescent is worthwhile yet uncommon; such research specifically concerning adolescents is sparse with few studies completed by educators. It is suggested in this study that middle school students are highly interested in humorous literature with subpopulations by grade level, sex, and/or achievement level showing no difference in level of humor appreciation. Humorous literature was consistently rated higher than other literature forms and is requested by students. Furthermore, the premise is developed that humor is an important part of development and should be included in an adolescent's course of study with such placement logically occurring in the area of language arts.

The study of humorous literature and the adolescent is worthwhile, but not often undertaken by researchers. There are many studies centering around this age group, but few are solely devoted to adolescents and their humor preferences.

Most research dealing with humor in any form has been concerned with infants, pre-schoolers, and slightly older children. Adults and special interest groups (such as the handicapped or prison population) have also received attention, while the adolescent group seems overlooked. Damico and Purkey (1978) stressed this point in their study of adolescent class clowns; a search of their topic revealed no research in this area. Martineau, in 1972, reviewed the humor studies available and reported that there were few sources relating to humor with none thoroughly examining the topic. McGhee (1989) states that nearly all the research and theory concerning humor development has been focused upon preadolescents. The majority of work completed up to 1988 used elementary school children as subjects, with pre-schoolers being the second most frequently studied. Therefore, researchers understand humor development in adolescence no better now than they did 80 years ago.

Also, humor research has often been completed by psychologists or others who are not necessarily educators. Many humor studies discuss the definition, theory, psychological or emotional aspects of humor but not its educational implications or uses.

There is a definite need for educational research in this area, but educators often ignore adolescent humor. Many

educators may see humor or humorous materials/activities as belonging outside the classroom door instead of inside, and there are complaints of the difficulty of finding suitable materials for this age. Most classroom materials emphasizing humor are designed for the elementary rather than the secondary student. Educators are sometimes fearful of humor, feeling that its inclusion will result in chaos, and some may use humor (especially sarcasm) incorrectly, becoming comedians and/or failing to teach their intended content well.

Nevertheless, humor is of interest to adolescents. Nevo and Nevo (1983) found all of their subjects knew what do when asked to create a humorous answer or response for a survey. Omwake (1937) found there was a tendency for students to rate themselves highly on having a sense of humor. Brumbaugh (1940) discovered that almost every child attempted to draw a humorous picture in a survey, although many were unable to complete other sections of a questionnaire. Other studies (Kappas, 1967; Kenderdine, 1931; Laing, 1939; Omwake, 1937; Laffal, Levine, & Redlich, 1953; and Cunningham, 1962) have stated that humor parallels intelligence and those students possessing a sense of humor are held above their peers in both popularity and emotional stability. Students having a sense of humor also tend to have a higher positive self-image, according to Goodchilds (1963).

Adolescence is a critical time for students and there are many influences and pressures surrounding them which must be dealt with. Humor, according to Brumbaugh (1940), is an important part of development and should therefore be included

in an adolescent's course of study.

Some teachers do use humor and humorous materials/activities in the classroom; Wells (1974) observed elementary teachers and stated that teachers considered humor necessary to the classroom. Bryant and Hunter (1981) indicated that humor is used in many junior high schools as well.

Additionally, teachers claim that humor stimulates interest in learning (Gilliland and Mauritsen, 1971; Welker, 1977; Bell, 1978; Baughman, 1979; Hamilton, 1986); establishes a positive classroom climate (Mechanic, 1962; Monson, 1968; Adams, 1972; Horn, 1972; Adams, 1974; Terry and Woods, 1975; Welker, 1977), makes learning fun (Gilliland and Mauritsen, 1971); aids in teaching serious or sensitive subjects (Adams, 1974); improves test taking and performance (Mechanic, 1962; Monson, 1968; Adams, 1972; Hauck and Thomas, 1972; Horn, 1972; Curran, 1973; Chapman and Crompton, 1978; Davies and Apter, 1980; Vance, 1987); and improves the relationship between student and teacher (Scott, 1976). If humorous activities/materials are this important to adolescents, they should then be studied more closely by educators.

Purpose

This study was concerned with the literature preferences of middle school students and centered around humorous literature. The purpose of the study was to answer the following questions: (1) Are middle school students interested in humorous literature?, (2) Are there differences by grade level, achievement level, and/or sex among middle level students in

their degree of interest in humor?, and (3) Is there a significant difference between middle schoolers' preference for humor when compared to other literature categories?

It was hypothesized that middle school students would indicate a preference for reading humorous literature, there would be no significant difference between middle schoolers' grade, sex, or achievement level in their degree of interest in humorous literature, and there would be a significant difference between middle schooler's preference for humor when compared to other literature categories.

Limitations

The study was conducted at two grade levels (seventh and eighth) and in one academic area (language arts). This language arts instruction came from two teachers in each school. Both participating schools were in rural communities, and both were of approximately equal size. Students were predominantly white with farming or blue-collar work being the typical family occupation.

Subjects

There were four student groups:

Insert Table 1 about here

Students were categorized according to their total percentile score on a standardized achievement test given earlier by their district. Students from School 1 were given the Scientific Research Association (SRA) Test, while students from School 2 were given the California Achievement Test (CAT). Tests

were essentially equal to one another regarding content. Percentile scores in the language arts categories were considered.

Insert Table 2 about here

Design

The research design used was a 2 (seventh and eighth grade) x 2 (sex) x 3 (low, average, or high achievement level) pilot study. A questionnaire given to students consisted of 17 literature items considered to be widely taught and/or familiar to middle schoolers by a panel of language arts instructors. Students were to indicate how likely they were to read each literature type listed.

The literature types (action/adventure, biography, classics, drama/plays, fantasy, fiction, historical fiction, humorous stories, mystery/suspense, newspaper articles, novels, poetry, romance, science fiction, short stories, sports stories, adolescent literature) were randomly placed on the questionnaire. At the right of each category was a Likert scale. The scale determiners were: would definitely not read, would probably not read, may or may not read, would probably read, and would definitely read. Reliability for the questionnaire was .69.

Procedure

Sampling was straightforward; students responded to the questionnaire during their regular language arts class after

receiving any necessary instructions and definitions. Each literature category was defined for the students by their classroom teacher who used identical definitions for each category. Students completed the form individually and were not allowed to confer with others unless they needed to ask a question of their teacher. The students were to read each literature category, then place an "X" in the scale space which best reflected their opinion of that particular category.

The primary objective of the questionnaire was to determine the extent of a student's appreciation for humorous literature. Those marking the humorous literature category with may or may not read, would probably read, or would definitely read were considered to have an interest in humorous literature. Those marking otherwise (would probably not read, would definitely not read) were not considered to have an interest in this category. The same scoring system applied to the other 16 items as well.

Results

Several methods were used to analyze the data collected. Mean scores were first reviewed to determine the extent of student interest in humorous and other literature categories.

Insert Table 3 about here

Item six, humorous literature, reported the highest mean at 4.2. Poetry, item 16, displayed the lowest at 2.4.

A 2 x 2 x 3 multiple analysis of variance was used to compare the response of student subpopulations to survey item

six.

Insert Table 4 about here

The differences between the subpopulations' interest in humor was not statistically significant. All groups displayed an interest in reading humorous literature.

A factor analysis determined the actual number of factors contained in the questionnaire. There were 17 literature categories, but it was assumed that there were not 17 separate items listed. Both the rotated and unrotated factor matrix were reviewed.

Eigenvalue scores indicated only two main factors. The items loaded higher on the unrotated factor matrix. Each item must be greater than .30 and the amount of difference between each item must be greater than .20 to be assigned to either Factor 1 or 2.

Insert Table 5 about here

As these loadings indicated only two main factors, the following tables present the literature categories contained in Factors 1 and 2.

Insert Table 6 about here

Insert Table 7 about here

Not every literature category included in the questionnaire loaded sufficiently into one of the two factors. These categories were placed in a separate ambiguous category and were not considered part of either Factor 1 or 2.

Insert Table 8 about here

A split-plot factorial analysis of variance was used to determine the literature factors (1 or 2) which appealed to certain students. The test used sex as a grouping variable, and the unweighted scores were considered.

Insert Table 9 about here

This table displays the combined observed means for sex and achievement concerning Factors 1 and 2 (traditional and action oriented literature). The significant main effect was between the sexes. There were no significant effects between achievement and literature appreciation. Males tended to appreciate the literature of Factor 2 (action-oriented) while females preferred Factor 1 (traditional literature).

A review of the main effects shows significant differences only between the sexes in literature appreciation.

Insert Table 10 about here

Insert Table 11 about here

Insert Table 12 about here

There were significant differences by sex in literature appreciation. Males and females preferred different literature, with males leaning toward more action based literature and females preferring the more traditional forms.

The final analysis was a Dunnet post hoc analysis. This univariate measure compared inventory item 6 (humorous literature) to the other 16 items on the form to determine if this category is actually a separate item.

Insert Table 13 about here

These results indicate that humor is considered to be a separate literature category. Elements of humor may be included in all types of literature, but humorous literature may stand alone as a specific literature type.

Discussion

Middle school students are apparently interested in reading humorous literature, and they tend to enjoy it equally. This category was rated highly by every subpopulation, showing that humor does have a wide and diverse appeal.

However, neither school surveyed offered a regular language arts unit or section dealing with humorous literature. Both instructors indicated that humor is given no special attention and that units incorporating only humorous literature are not taught. Occasionally humorous pieces or activities are used, but basically although humor is not ignored, it is not emphasized either. This high rating given to humorous literature becomes significant, for although the students have no major classroom exposure to humor they are demonstrating interest and awareness for this category.

Previous studies have shown humor to be a positive addition to the classroom if correctly used, and this study shows humor as of interest to adolescents. Middle schoolers are a particularly challenging group, so their high humor interest should be explored through the use of quality materials and instruction. Interest in the material being studied transfers to higher quality student work and attention in class.

The majority of the 17 literature types loaded into two main factors, although an ambiguous category was specified. Factor 1, traditional literature, contained familiar categories most often studied in classrooms. As these categories are also quite broad, they were prone to higher ratings as the student may interpret

them in various personal ways. The more specific categories resulted in lower ratings, for they did not allow for much student interpretation and were more prone to strong likes or dislikes.

Factor 2 (Action-Oriented Literature) was given average ratings, and the ambiguous items were narrow and perhaps partially unfamiliar to some. For example, newspaper articles may have translated as want ads or the sports section, depending upon the student.

Females tended to enjoy Factor 1 literature with males enjoying Factor 2, perhaps in part because instructors and others tend to steer the sexes towards these types early. Sports, action/adventure, and science fiction tend to have male protagonists; thus males are more likely to read these stories. Stereotypically, females are not expected to enjoy these aggressive types and are given the literature most often contained in Factor 1.

Although students were given definitions for each category, preferences were most likely based upon personal experience. It seems unlikely that preferences would be altered after hearing a category definition, and it is assumed that the questionnaire accurately reflected the literature preferences of the students. Moreover, such a questionnaire would not doubt be beneficial in determining where student literary interests lie in areas other than humorous literature.

Perhaps the main instructional implication is simply awareness, for humorous literature enjoys several distinct

qualities. It is recognizable and popular with all diverse student groups, and is also a separate category of literature which may be incorporated into other areas of reading material. Humorous materials should be seen as the benefits they are and used in the classroom whenever possible.

Implications

This study does provide areas for further research. Additional items, such as subcategories, would provide a more complete profile of student preferences. It is also recommended that a humor survey be given following the questionnaire. This would indicate the most popular forms of humor for this age group along with providing a specific profile of those rating the humor types. This knowledge of desired humor forms would be useful when constructing a language arts unit concerning humor. The student should be exposed to various humor and literature forms, but preferences may be considered.

The purpose of this study was not to maintain that humor should infiltrate every level or area of a school's course of study. Instead, it is hoped that it will remind instructors of the advantages of using humor and humorous materials in the classroom. Humor is not a panacea, but it is recommended, beneficial, and effective when properly used. It is, perhaps most importantly, highly appreciated by students in the middle grades.

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Table 1

Summary of Participants

Total Participants	261				
Total Males	119				
Total Females	142				
Total 7th Males	66	(School 1)	51	(School 2)	15
Total 7th Females	64	(School 1)	40	(School 2)	24
Total 8th Males	53	(School 1)	23	(School 2)	30
Total 8th Females	78	(School 1)	34	(School 2)	44

Table 2

Summary of Subjects' Percentile Scores

	High (67-99)	Average (34-66)	Low (1-33)
Total Students	156	77	28
Total Males	62	41	16
Total Females	94	36	12
Total 7th Males	34	23	9
School 1	21	22	8
School 2	13	1	1
Total 8th Males	28	18	7
School 1	11	7	5
School 2	17	11	2
Total 7th Females	48	13	3
School 1	32	6	2
School 2	16	7	1
Total 8th Females	46	23	9
School 1	24	6	4
School 2	22	17	5

Table 3

Summary of Category Means and Standard Deviations

Item Number	Item Name	Mean	SD
1	Mystery/Suspense	3.7816	0.9856
2	Biography	2.7471	1.0025
3	Fiction	3.9464	0.8532
4	Fantasy	3.3103	1.1699
5	Short Story	3.4751	1.0021
6	Humorous Lit.	4.2299	0.8325
7	Novels	3.1686	1.2474
8	Sports Stories	3.0307	1.3892
9	Action/Adventure	3.9617	0.9479
10	Newspaper Articles	3.0307	1.0520
11	Adolescent Lit.	3.6897	1.1126
12	Science Fiction	3.0230	1.2768
13	Romance	3.1801	1.5071
14	Historical Fiction	2.8927	1.1783
15	Drama/Plays	2.4866	1.2172
16	Poetry	2.4751	1.2201
17	Classics	2.5594	1.1902

Table 4

Summary of Student Subpopulations Compared with Item 6

Subpopulation	Number	Mean
All Males	119	4.15
All Females	142	4.30
7th Males	66	4.14
8th Males	53	4.17
7th Females	64	4.34
8th Females	78	4.26
All Low Ability	28	4.07
All Average Ability	79	4.22
All High Ability	154	4.27
Low Ability Females	12	4.08
Average Ability Females	38	4.26
High Ability Females	92	4.34
Low Ability Males	16	4.06
Average Ability Males	41	4.17
High Ability Males	62	4.16

P = .05

Table 5

Summary of Unrotated Factor Loadings for Factors 1 and 2

Item	Factor 1	Factor 2
Mystery/Suspense	0.25371	0.22714
Biography	0.13411	-0.05325
Fiction	0.41838	0.03614
Fantasy	0.40134	0.19562
Short Stories	0.44088	0.11846
Humorous Literature	0.31904	0.15338
Novels	0.51360	0.18629
Sports Stories	-0.06939	0.36400
Action/Adventure	0.32626	0.54837
Newspaper Articles	0.17623	0.21784
Adolescent Literature	0.39044	-0.47474
Science Fiction	0.13172	0.66522
Romance	0.52771	-0.61616
Historical Fiction	0.27113	0.31376
Drama/Plays	0.67969	-0.02536
Poetry	0.49384	-0.06944
Classics	0.52844	0.09029

Factor	Eigenvalue	Pct. of Var.	Cum. Pct.
1	2.62758	59.3	59.3
2	1.80649	40.7	100.0

Table 6

Summary of Factor 1 (Traditional Literature) Categories

Item Number	Item Name	Factor Loading
3	Fiction	0.41838
4	Fantasy	0.40134
5	Short Stories	0.44088
6	Humorous Literature	0.31904
7	Novels	0.51360
15	Drama/Plays	0.67969
16	Poetry	0.49384
17	Classics	0.52844

Table 7

Summary of Factor 2 (Action-Oriented Literature) Categories

Item Number	Item Name	Factor Loading
8	Sports Stories	0.36400
9	Action/Adventure	0.54837
12	Science Fiction	01.66522

Table 8

Summary of Ambiguous Categories

Item Number	Item Name	Fac. 1 Load.	Fac. 2 Load.
1	Mystery/Suspense	0.25371	0.22714
2	Biography	0.13411	-0.05325
10	Newspaper Articles	0.17623	0.21784
11	Adolescent Lit.	0.39044	-0.47474
13	Romance	0.52771	-0.61616
14	Historical Fiction	0.27113	0.31376

Table 9

Summary of Combined Observed Means for Sex and Achievement Concerning Factors 1 and 2

Sex	Factor 1 Means	Factor 2 Means
Male	2.95719	3.85047
Female	3.44951	2.95578

Achievement	Factor 1 Means	Factor 2 Means
Low (1-33)	3.26953	3.44444
Average (34-66)	3.12572	3.40629
High (67-99)	3.21481	3.35864

Table 10

Summary of Main Effects of Sex by Achievement

Multivariate Tests of Significance (S = 2, M = 1/2, N = 126)

Test	Value	App. F	Hyp. DF	Error DF	Sig of F.
Wilks	.97862	1.38002	4.00	508.00	.240

Table 11

Summary of Main Effects by Achievement

Multivariate Tests of Significance (S = 2, M = 1/2, N = 126)

Test	Value	App. F	Hyp. DF	Error DF	Sig. of F
Wilks	.98969	.65951	4.00	508.00	.620

Table 12

Summary of Main Effects by Sex

Multivariate Tests of Significance (S = 1, M = 0, N = 126)

Test	Value	App. F	Hyp. DF	Error DF	Sig. of F
Wilks	.64528	69.81391	2.00	254.00	0.0

Table 13

Summary of Comparisons Between Humorous Literature and All Other Item Categories

Univariate F-tests with (1,259) D.F.

Humorous literature compared to:

Variable	Hypoth. SS	F	Sign of F
Mystery/Suspense	24.66818	33.99292	.000
Biography	278.01878	258.88513	.000
Fiction	22.79174	35.41197	.000
Fantasy	27.70757	26.70294	.000
Short Stories	3.32575	4.07594	.045
Novels	44.90878	41.23336	0.0
Sports Stories	41.09690	28.04279	.000
Action/Adventure	63.16695	104.53094	.000
Newspaper Articles	53.51199	56.49161	.000
Adolescent Literature	6.50525	7.77484	.006
Science Fiction	40.80658	36.76113	.000
Romance	29.97442	24.96408	.000
Historical Fiction	63.04013	52.97090	.000
Drama/Plays	207.67808	195.17986	.000
Poetry	186.18298	161.60342	.000
Classics	126.00627	116.67839	.000